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If You Track Me, Will We Still Trust Each Other?

Research paper explores the impact of location-based social networking on relationships

By KATHY PRETZ5 November 2012



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Want to know whether friends, relatives, or coworkers are nearby? You might no longer have to wonder. If they've signed up with one of more than 100 location-based social networks (LBSNs) or apps, including Facebook, Footprints, Foursquare, Latitude, and WhosHere, you can track them down. The services require users to give permission to display their whereabouts to others.

But what are the implications of such surveillance tools? In

particular, what effect do they have on trust in relationships? Several IEEE members from the University of Wollongong, in Australia, wanted to find out. Their paper, "[Location-Based Social Networking: Impact on Trust in Relationships](http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/articleDetails.jsp?tp=&arnumber=6213869&contentType=Journals+%26+Magazines&queryText%3DLocation-Based+Social+Networking%3A+Impact+on+Trust+in+Relationships), (<http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/articleDetails.jsp?tp=&arnumber=6213869&contentType=Journals+%26+Magazines&queryText%3DLocation-Based+Social+Networking%3A+Impact+on+Trust+in+Relationships>)" which appeared in the summer issue of *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, explains how they discovered that tracking technology might come with a cost. They determined that tracking can cause mistrust, exacerbate already strained relationships, and discourage people from taking each other at their word.

"To strike an agreement whereby two people share their location data, they first have to have established trust in their relationship," the Wollongong researchers wrote.

IEEE Senior Member Katina Michael and Member Anas Aloudat, along with two other researchers, conducted the study in 2009. They used five focus groups composed of 18 to 25 students from their university between the ages of 22 and 45 to rate the impact of LBSN usage on the level of trust within different types of relationships, including family members, friends, and coworkers.

FAMILY

When parents use the services to track their children, there is a fine line between trusting the kids and providing for their safety, according to the focus groups. Location-based services can be a lifesaver if you need to locate a child in an emergency, but trust is fragile, several participants noted. Parents might say they want to verify whether their children are actually where they said they would be, but the safety issue could become “a surrogate for using LBSN for tracking as well,” one participant said, adding, “I do not think it is appropriate to be tagging your children. That is what you are basically doing—you are strapping them down and putting a GPS locator on their leg.

“Trust is everything in a family. If you are not going to be able to trust your family, then who can you trust?”

FRIENDS

Although most focus group members said they trust close friends with their location information, others say using the technology for such relationships is unnecessary. After all, they said, close friends have a general idea of each other’s daily activities.

Many LBSN users can be too trusting of mere acquaintances. “Adding everyone to their ‘friend list’ may be risky, leading them to misconstrue stalkers as friends,” said one participant. “You might think of them as acquaintances, but they might think of you as their girlfriend.” Focus group members pointed out that people don’t usually give strangers their location and then trust them not to misuse that information, so it shouldn’t be any different for people who are only online friends.

THE WORKPLACE

What did the focus groups think of employers using location services to monitor their employees? It depends. Tracking would be justified, they said, for workers such as truck drivers, couriers, and real estate agents, or for workers in sensitive positions involving, say, secret military projects. But it should be off limits for workers “within a closed office building space,” one said. “Constantly checking to see if someone will be on time will just continue to diminish trust,” another participant said.

Others said employers are entitled to check up on their employees during office hours, but tracking should be turned off once the workday is over.

OTHERS

The focus groups answered with a resounding “No!” when asked if they would trust commercial companies or the government with their location information. They fear their data could be shared and exploited by third parties or by government employees. Some said they would grant an exception to the government in an emergency, however.

TRUST, DON’T VERIFY

In general, the focus groups said that knowing someone’s whereabouts provided an incomplete picture. Also, “one may increasingly develop a false sense of security just because they know where someone is on a digital map,” they said.

“There seems to be a subtle but strong link between trust and monitoring,” the researchers concluded. “The question becomes: If you trust me, then why the need to do lookups on my real-time physical

whereabouts? You should just believe me when I tell you where I am, where I have been, and where I am about to go.”

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